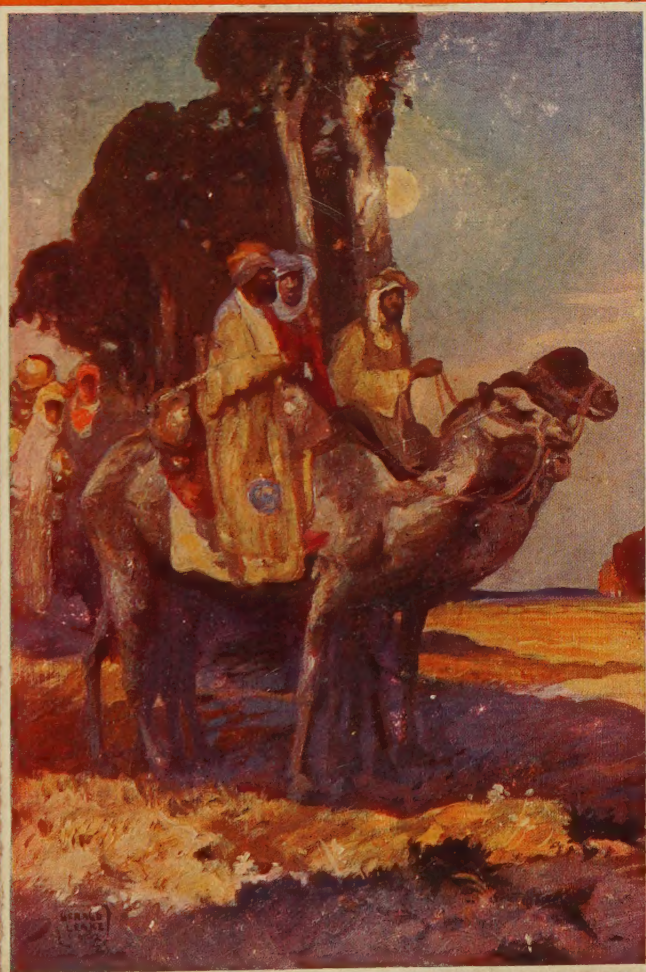


THE STORY OF SANTA CLAUS



BY S.R. LITTLEWOOD

WORLD-STORIES ILLUSTRATED

E1-50

THE STORY OF SANTA CLAUS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE STORY OF PIERROT

With Seven Black and White Illustrations and
Cover Design by SIDNEY FILMORE



PRESS OPINIONS

"It is the best literary shillingsworth we have seen of recent years."—*The Evening Times*.


"Many authorities have been drawn upon for this little work for with all Mr. Littlewood's charm of diction and pretty imaginings he is accurate as to facts—and we commend the story of the world's lover, laughers, and jester to all good people who believe that loving, laughing, and jesting are three of the finest antidotes to sorrow that the world has ever known."—*The Academy*.

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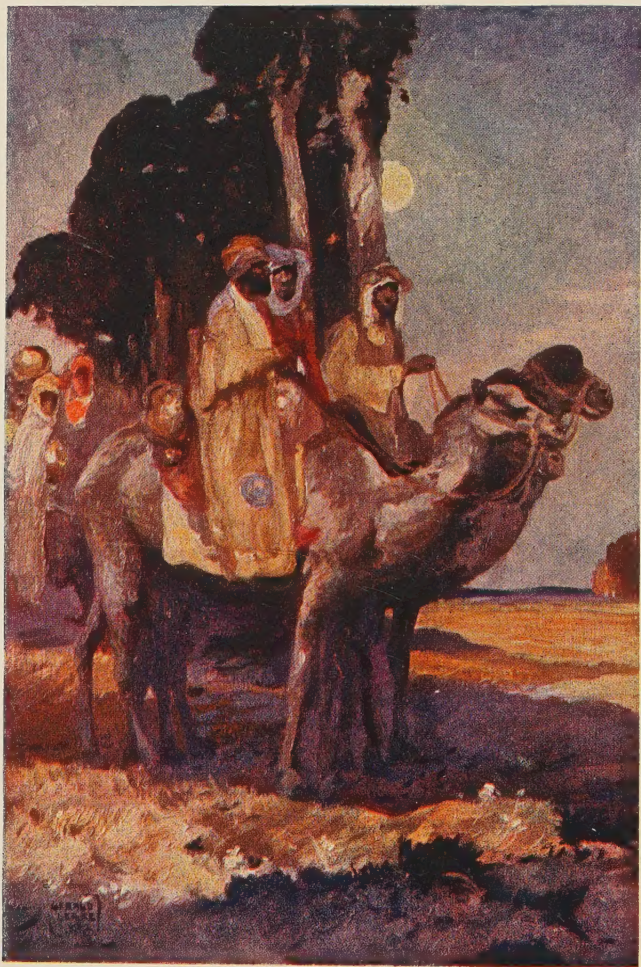
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A strange caravan starting forth upon the northern road.

(Frontispiece.)

THE STORY OF SANTA CLAUS

By S. R. LITTLEWOOD

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
BY SIDNEY FILMORE AND GERALD LEAKE

LONDON
HERBERT & DANIEL
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1912

PREFACE

THE aim of this little volume—as of *The Story of Pierrot*, which opened the series—is to show, as simply as may be, the personal growth, the ever-changing life-history of a character born of the world's imagination.

With Santa Claus there is a difficulty that does not occur in the case of Pierrot, for Santa Claus is inevitably concerned with the great facts of Christianity. Although he himself is so entirely unsectarian, it is hard to touch upon doctrine, even indirectly, without the danger of offence.

If this danger has been incurred, the only apology that can be offered is that every effort has been made to avoid it. In regard to the first Christmas Day, all the controversies that have raged around the details of St. Luke's simple narrative have been ignored, as unessential to the spirit of the scene. In the life of St. Nicholas himself, everything that seems beautiful has been willingly accepted as true.

It is inevitable that because Santa Claus has to

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do with children, any book about him must be classed as a "children's book." But, after all, it is part of Santa Claus's message to teach us that we are all children.

S. R. L.

LONDON, *April*, 1912.

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THE STORY OF SANTA CLAUS

SANTA CLAUS AT BETHLEHEM

*The snow lay on the ground,
The stars shone bright,
When Christ, our Lord, was born,
On Christmas night. . . .
Good angels hovered near,
And sang this song,
"Venite, adoremus
Dominum !"* Old English Carol.

THERE are some guesses that the world has made—truer in their way than truth itself. One is that it was upon a winter's night—a cold, clear night of frost and stars—that Christ was born in Bethlehem. "It was the winter wild." As a matter of fact there is nothing in the Bible, or anywhere else, that could have made anyone think of winter, if the idea had not come naturally. Christmas as a festival was not thought of until more than a century after

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the coming of Christ. Even then no one could be quite certain what the real date was—whether it was in January, March, or even September. So also there is nothing—save some allusions in the apocryphal gospels—to show that the divine birth happened at night. All we know is that to certain shepherds “abiding in the fields, and keeping watch over their flock by night,” came the message of the angel that “there is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” No one knows exactly where the shepherds were, or how long their journey took them. We know simply that they were “in the same country.” They went to Bethlehem, and they found that the Virgin Mother had already, with her own hands, wrapped the Babe in swaddling-clothes, and laid Him in a manger, “because there was no room for them in the inn.” All else is reverent fancy. Yet who is there that does not believe in the time of Christmas as he believes in his own existence? Who is there that does not believe in the very hour itself—that “midnight clear” when the angels’ song brought its good tidings of great joy to all people?

Now what has this got to do with Santa Claus?

Santa Claus at Bethlehem

As everyone knows, he is just short for St. Nicholas, and one has only to look into any list of the saints to see that St. Nicholas was not to turn up for hundreds of years after the life of Christ on earth. Can it be that old Santa Claus—cheery, homely old Santa Claus, with his bluff, rosy face, his red, snow-caked cloak and sprig of holly, and the big bundle over his back, stuffed full of brand-new toys and goodies—can it be that this Santa Claus of ours, whom no one save the little folk takes seriously at all, had anything really to do with the event of that wondrous winter's night in far-away Palestine nearly two thousand years ago? Strange though it may seem, the more one gets to know Santa Claus, and the more one gets to know about him, the more certain one will be that he had very much to do with it indeed. He made his way just as surely to Bethlehem as he did to any place that the worthy St. Nicholas visited in the course of a long and eventful life. We shall hear all about St. Nicholas later on. We shall also find, perhaps, what our old friend Santa Claus was doing, and where he was, in that gladdest hour of all creation, when the very stars sang together for joy.

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We must try, then, in however dim and bare a way, to recall the setting of the scene, not as it was—no one can do that—but just as the world in general has decided to imagine it, taking winter and night and all things needful for granted. We shall find Bethlehem itself hardly altered in many ways from the Bethlehem through which the modern tourist makes his way to the Church of the Nativity, that gloomy and unnecessary shrine, telling, in every lifeless stone, of wasted blood and tears. High up in the very heart of the mountains of Judea, perched upon its grey ridge, terraced and crescent-shaped, with deep valleys sloping away on every hand, Bethlehem was then, as now, though peopled with lowly folk, a “royal city,” a “city set on a hill.” Like Zion’s self two leagues away, it was picked out to all the world beneath, against the dazzling blue of day and the starry night. Hemmed round by barren and rugged mountains on the north and west, to the south and east it looked down, over rocky slopes, green here and there with olive trees and vineyards, figs and almonds, upon a rich valley. Beyond stretch now as then the sand-hills of the Judean desert—sun-

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dried, desolate, lifeless — the Judean desert whence came the voice of John, “crying in the wilderness” that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Beyond these again, hidden away beneath the blue and purple masses of the mountains of Moab, the sluggish waters of the Dead Sea sleep unseen.

This little, fruitful valley is, we must remember, the very country where Ruth, the Moabitess, gleaned in the cornfields of Boaz. This is the country where David, the shepherd-boy, light of heart, tended his “few sheep in the wilderness.” Here he defended them against the wild beasts of the neighbouring desert—here he slew “the lion and the bear.” Here, in the shadow of the sun-bleached rocks, he sang and piped, and grew to be ruddy and of a fair countenance, and wise above his years. Hither he returned from the presence of King Saul “to feed his father’s sheep at Bethlehem.” From here again he took back with him the “parched corn” and loaves for his brothers in the camp, and the “ten cheeses for the captain of their thousand,” little dreaming of his own glories that were to be.

The centuries have rolled by, and still upon

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this little pastoral plot between the mountains and the desert great tidings are to come to shepherds "abiding in the field." Some fancy that they were sitting round their fire upon the very hillock where in the long ago was the threshing-floor of Boaz himself. They are the poorest of the poor, but in a land and at a time in which poverty had not quite the terrors that we imagine for it. The cares that beset the labourer of our modern western world mattered little to them. "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. . . . Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal." The words of the Master were to fall, in days when wealth was more than ever precarious, upon ears apt enough to understand. A handful of figs, some water from the well, and they were happy—as happy as could be possible with obscure members of a little, conquered nation, half forgotten, half lost amidst the vast and splendid dominions that "paid tribute unto Cæsar." Their personal needs, as we have seen, were few. All the more may these unlettered shepherds have been

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free to remember their ancient race, captive so long—even now beneath an alien tyrant's rule—yet still proud in its mystic, sole possession of “the covenant of the Most High.”

They sit there, in the flickering light of the fire, with long, black hoods over their heads, sheepskins round their shoulders to keep off the chill dews, and staffs of oak or sycamore in their hands. They sit there, talking, dozing, while the magical eastern night deepens around them. Even these poor shepherds are dreaming of what all the world was dreaming then. Now that the years “spoken of by Daniel the prophet” were accomplished, whence was to come that great Deliverer, that Son of Man, who was to free Israel from the yoke of the oppressor? When was to begin that golden age for which mankind was longing after centuries of war, tyranny, rapine? When was the dove of peace to find at last its champion against the eagles of power?

We know that suddenly, as they talked, “the glory of the Lord shone round about them.” Even in a rough little outline of orthodox tradition one doubts if it is of much use for us of this age to try to picture that glory to ourselves.

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How shall we suggest by image or symbol the "multitude of the heavenly host" who filled earth and sky with praise—the "first Nowell" of "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men"? There are the conventional angels, the conventional glory of the coloured print. Shall we accept them as the best possible suggestion of what the shepherds actually did see? Perhaps it is better that we should not make any attempt at all, but just try to learn what little we can of those wonders from the same source. Suppose we ourselves go out into the Christmas night. Suppose we seek out the top of some little hill, of some little tower—anywhere where we can feel, as the shepherds must have done, that we are alone with the stars. Even to us street-bred folk, how near sometimes seems the heart of all that splendour, the heart of the universe itself! In the cold, clear air we think of them no longer as tiny points of light, twinkling through a dim atmospheric veil. They are near us, close over our heads, crowding in upon us, millions and millions and millions of shining living beings, throbbing with light, showering out ray upon ray, colour upon colour. Life is everywhere—

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endless life, endless movement, endless praise. Beyond the flashing of old Sirius and the jewelled belt of Orion, is there no song that we can hear, no choir of "young-eyed cherubim"? Who shall pretend that there is no music of the spheres? Even our earthly music has caught at least some echoes of that song. There is an anthem that springs to our own hearts, to our own lips, when we see how "the heavens declare the glory of God: and the firmament sheweth His handiwork."

So they came to Bethlehem, the little town, crowded for the great enrolment as an English country town might be upon a public holiday. If folk speak true, the cave where the Christ-child lay cradled amongst the oxen was to be found right at the farthest, topmost edge of the highway. Was it after all a cave—or was it a pent-house byre, as the mediæval painters loved to suggest, or was it the central, open courtyard of the typical Oriental caravanserai? To tell the truth, in this there does not seem to be any particular reason why we should go out of our way to quarrel with tradition. We shall have to quarrel with it quite often enough as it is. In any case the alternatives would

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imply—so travellers assure us—a difference in company, but hardly in comfort. On the other hand there are stories of surrounding splendour that seem to be worthily forgot, as unbefitting the whole meaning and purpose of Christ's birth. We have come to think of the Holy Family just as simple country folk, dusty, tired, and wayworn with their four days' journey from Nazareth—jostled, ignored, ridiculed by most, pitied perhaps by some, the old man with his staff, the young wife great with child.

We seem to see them the last to arrive of all, lost amongst the crowd of other pilgrims of Judah who had already gathered at the great khan. We see them wearily making their round of the cloisters on each side of the courtyard, where the well-to-do folk had already laid out their mats for the night. We see them finding at last no corner of welcome—not even a yard or two of space in the offal-strewn courtyard itself, among the groaning camels and beasts of burden. We see them driven out, possibly with jeers—up the long hill to the outer limit of the city, hungry and homeless, fearing at every moment lest the time should come when one of them at least could go no farther. Al-

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most when they have given up hope, they find this dark limestone cave, bare and foul, but warm with the breath and bodies of the heedless oxen stabled there. Here, for a time at least, they are safe from the intrusion of the outer world. Here, while the mantle of night falls over the hills, and the little city, with all its home-coming wayfarers now at their journey's end, settles peacefully to sleep—here, with the silence only broken by the quiet breathing and champing of cattle, the hour of the world's deliverance draws near.

So far as the plain, ungarnished story is concerned, this is all that can be surely set down. But even of the thousands of legends that have grown up around that simple group in the little cave at Bethlehem some at least are worthy to be preserved as well. Some have lived just because they have not been invented for purposes of doctrine, but are part of the natural, eternal harmony of truth. As it happens, these are not so much the great and dignified events. We are told, of course, how, on this night of nights, "the oracles were dumb." We are told how it was just at this time that the doors of the temple of Janus were shut far away in Rome,

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and for a little space in all their troublous history the armies of the Empire laid down the sword. We are told how the statue of Jupiter fell from its pedestal ; how oil gushed forth in the Jewish quarter ; how the Emperor himself had visions that resulted in the setting up of the Ara Cœli, the Altar of Heaven, upon the Capitoline. All this may have been so or not. It does not really matter very much, so long as nothing interferes with the truth that it was in quiet humbleness that the Prince of Peace came to make his dwelling among men. So, too, with the "universal pause in nature," of which we shall have more to say in another place.

It is, in fact, the little fancies of just such humble folk as those among whom the Christ-child drew his first breath—ludicrous anachronisms, patent impossibilities—that one treasures far more than all this world-pageantry. We do well to remember that an age of simple faith has called the shepherds by their names. It has given them the boy Trowle for butt, and a four-footed comrade, the dog Melampo, who was permitted to be among the worshipping band at the manger's side, with the oxen, and the

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ass upon which Mary rode, and another, a she-ass, that showed the way. It would be indeed a pity if all the tender thoughts that make the dumb creation share in those lowly honours were to be driven from memory. It is pleasant, for instance, to believe that in the thatch which our mediæval forefathers fondly supposed served as roof to the stable, the wren built its nest—"God's little fowl," "Our Lady's hen." Nor can one pass over entirely the beautiful fancy of the old print that shows us the birds and beasts of the country-side joining in a homely chorus of joy. The cock crowed, *Christus natus est*, Christ is born ! The raven asked, *Quando, quando ?* When ? The horse replied, *Hac nocte*, This night ! The ox cried, *Ubi ? Ubi ?* Where ? The sheep bleated, *Bethlehem !* The ass brayed, *Eamus !* Let us go there !

In the same way, fitter than all the apocryphal stories—of miraculous effulgence beaming from the cave's walls and so on—are the simple folk-tales of the wayside flowers that helped to line that rough cradle. They are flowers, as we all know, some of which have never been seen anywhere near Bethlehem, but what does that matter ? Shall the lady's-bedstraw of our own

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hedgerow ever forfeit its proud claim, or the clovers, the sainfoin or holy hay, the wild thyme, the cradle-grasses, which the ass always greets with a friendly bray, and spearmint, the "sage of Bethlehem"? It is a pretty thought, whatever science may say, that they all blossomed there, save the bracken, which has withered flowerless ever since. Shall anyone rob the mullein, too, "Our Lady's candle," of the honour of having given light in the darkness, or the ash for having yielded its wood, though green, as fuel for the little fire before which the Christ-child was washed and swaddled? It is, they say, even now its eternal reward that it should burn better the more freshly it is cut. Still less must one forget the story of Madelon and the Christmas rose—how with the shepherds there strayed into the cave a little maid. Whilst each shepherd gave his gift—one his pipe, another a snow-white lamb, another a pair of doves—she had nothing to offer, and burst into tears. One remembers that as she knelt weeping at the entrance to the cave, the Angel Gabriel appeared to her, and asked her what her trouble was, and she answered, "My Lord, it is because I have nothing to

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offer to the Child." Then the Angel Gabriel touched the ground with his staff, and wherever he touched it there sprang up a Christ-flower or Christmas rose. And Madelon gathered them in her arms and laid them at the Child's feet.

So through the ages this little company that gathered round the manger-bed at Bethlehem—the shepherds, the oxen, the ass, the dog Melampo and the little maid Madelon—have lived in thought and art and legend. To this very day the "waits" as they go carolling bring to our remembrance the little band of field-folk who went forth "glorifying and praising God." In Italy they are shepherds still, the "pifferari," playing upon their pipes as they make their way down from the mountain pastures to the villages and towns of the plain beneath. Not only so, but while the carolling of the "waits" serves to remind us of the songs of the shepherds, their journey from house to house has, in the always baffling medley of tradition, come to represent Joseph and Mary's long-fruitless quest in search of a lodging. Throughout the whole of the Advent Novena, or nine days' preparation for Christmas, the wanderings of Joseph

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and Mary are still brought to mind by all sorts of customs in Catholic countries. In Spain the "posada" or hostelry processions go from door to door with images of Mary and Joseph followed by taper-bearers. They knock everywhere in vain, until they come to the church, where shelter is begged on behalf of "Mary, Queen of Heaven, who has not where to lay her head; for the night is dark and cold, and she is a wanderer from far Galilee." The procession goes in, and makes its way to the Crib—the little corner of the church made to represent the cave at Bethlehem. After a litany has been sung, a boy with wings on his shoulders and a bambino in his arms lays the image of the Holy Child in the manger. At this the tapers are lighted, and all burst forth into a joyous carol. In Sicily there are companies of blind men who, as though seeking for the light, grope their way through the villages, where every cottage is bright with its nine candles to typify the days of waiting. At one time, even in England, the whole of December was recognised as a holy month. Hence, according to some, the Scotch have drawn their "Hogmanay," of which we may hear again. Still

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more to the purpose is the belief, held wellnigh everywhere, that on the holy night no stranger must be driven from the door, lest once more, even in symbol, the Holy Family should be scorned and rejected; for "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me."

Do you know the story of Been—a prosperous township once, close to Zoutleeuw, in Holland? There upon a Christmas Eve years and years and years ago the bells rang merrily forth across the snow. Lights gleamed from the windows, fires roared up every chimney, and all was cosy glow, and song, and dance, and jollity. To this town there came trudging through the snow and biting wind a little unknown child. Hungry and in rags, he gave a faltering tap at this door and that, but few heard him. Those who did drove him from the threshold, and went on with their merry-making. What happened to the child is still untold. We know what happened to the town and all its gay folk. That very night the sea came surging into its streets and squares. It flooded mansion and cottage—rose over the house-tops, over the spires of the churches. . . . The

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boatmen on the Zuyder Zee still hear on Christmas Eve a bell ringing faintly, far down beneath the water, where the buried city lies. Some say that it is a ghostly bell, rung by restless spirits ; some that it is a bell of mercy and of truest joy, a bell to warn all thoughtless revellers that in every forlorn and homeless wanderer, hungry, and poor, and in misery, the Christ-child lives again.

Here, then, is the first message of Christmas. Perhaps it may also prove to be the last. But how is it that we have not yet kept our promise and shown in what guise it was that Santa Claus came to Bethlehem ? We shall see later on. Meanwhile it may be well to remember that even if Santa Claus had not yet arrived, he was, in a wonderful way, represented there by proxy. Who is this that bends lovingly over the cradle—the nearest of all save Mary herself, the first among men to know and worship the Holy Child ? It is no arrogant youth, no princely figure in the pride and bloom of life. Hale and vigorous he is, as tradition tells us ; but years have brought him mellowness of heart, and wisdom, and tenderness, and cheery humility. Is it to be of no significance

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that age was thus honoured at the first Christmas feast ?

Joseph was an old man,
An old man was he,
When he married Mary,
The Queen of Galilee !

SANTA CLAUS, THE WISE MAN

*Then did they know assuredly
Within that house the King did lie :
One entered in there for to see,
But found the Babe in poverty.*

*Then entered all the Wise Men three
Most reverently upon their knee,
And offered there in his presence,
Both gold and myrrh and frankincense.*

The Golden Carol.

AMONG all the nations of the earth there were just a few other people besides the little company that we have already described who knew in a wonderful way what was happening in the cave at Bethlehem. Santa Claus knew ! If we would really search for him we must go hundreds of miles away, far across the Syrian desert. We must go to where the Euphrates and the Tigris, springing from Paradise itself, water the fertile plains of Babylon—that richest land in all the world ; cradle, perhaps, of the human race. Here we shall see a strange caravan starting forth upon the northern road. It is the road by

Santa Claus, the Wise Man

which all must still go who would skirt the great desert, round by Palmyra and Damascus, to the "land flowing with milk and honey" that lies between the sand and the sea. By the splendid trappings of camels and of mules, by the gorgeous robes, the air of dignity and of power in the chief folk of this cavalcade, one gathers that it is no mere company of merchants. On the other hand, one misses the retinue of soldiery. This is not the journey of a sovereign of any commonplace kind. Who are they, then, these princely travellers, making post-haste, silent and eager-eyed, along the way that was once the way of conquest? Here, long ago, came Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, with all his host, to take captive the people of that pleasant land, to bring their king in chains to Babylon, and the golden vessels that he found in the house of their God. Who are these, whose mission is so evidently of peace? We shall probably have guessed already that they are none other than the Wise Men, those Magi who came to Herod the king at Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship Him."

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For no reason at all, save the number of their gifts, the tradition handed on by the Venerable Bede has survived all others. This tells us that there were three of them, and that their names were Melchior, an old man with a white beard, Gaspar, a fair youth, and Baltasar, a negro. Always the names are the same, and always Melchior is the oldest of the three, but hardly two legends agree as to the place whence each came, and sometimes it is Baltasar that is the fair youth and Gaspar "the black Ethiop." Nearly every fancy is based, one way or another, just on the general prophecy that "Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising." The Kings of Tharsis and the isles, the Kings of Arabia and Saba shall offer gifts. On the other hand, the "Golden Legend" itself takes no pains thus to divide them between Shem and Ham and Japheth. It calls them simply kings and "enchanters," and tells a beautiful story of how they were gathered on a mountain and a star appeared to them "which had the form of a right fair child." On his forehead was a "shining Cross," and he "spake to these three kings, saying, 'Go ye hastily into the land of Judæa, and there ye

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shall find the king that ye seek, which is born of a virgin.'”

For us also, perhaps, it is enough to remember that the tradition which gives them their names clothes them in purple, and proclaims that they were kings. And kings they may even have been, in their own fashion. For after all we do happen to have a good many means of understanding—especially just now—who these Magi were, and why they came. We know that the priestly order of Persia had been long marked out among the priesthoods of the world both for lofty ideals and temporal power. We know that these followers of Zoroaster worshipped not fire in itself, as so many used to think, but, like the Jews, an unseen and one true God, of whose all-pervading energy fire was but one expression—of light against darkness, of good against evil. There were, to be sure, backsliders, prepared always to bow before “the golden image.” But some of them worshipped still in spirit and in truth. While empires waxed and waned—the Assyrian, the Median, the Persian—they had held their place alike with princes and peoples. They were not only soothsayers, astrologers, and diviners of

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dreams. They were rulers, "kings and priests after the order of Melchizedec." By this time, the once glorious plain, dotted as it had been with cities of a size and splendour hardly conceivable—Babylon itself was fourteen miles across from wall to wall!—had passed into subjection to the Parthians, near cousins to our present-day Turk, nomad and still almost barbaric conquerors from the north, whose government was one only of tribute and pillage. We can believe, under circumstances like these, what their ancient priesthood must have meant to these Babylonian peoples. We can believe how it must have reminded them of their own great history—of the far-off times of the shepherd-kings, who ruled in simple fealty to God Himself. It may have reminded them even of the days when their countryman, Abraham, the Chaldean, fared forth from their own city of Ur toward the land that had been promised him, "there to make a great nation."

So it was to visit no strange race, and with no unheralded purpose, that these "star-led wizards" were facing the perils of the thousand miles that lay in front of them before they could arrive at Jerusalem. In the long years of

Santa Claus, the Wise Man

the Captivity, the Magi must have made many friends amongst the kindred people that were in bondage "by the waters of Babylon." They were alike in blood, alike in religion, strangely alike in their beliefs regarding the story of the world's dawn. There must have been sympathy as well as fierce rivalry between Babylonian magician and captive Jew. The hope of the Messiah who was at this very time to arise in Jewry was equally theirs. One of their own prophets was his first harbinger. "I shall see Him, but not now : I shall behold Him, but not nigh : there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall arise out of Israel." So spake Balaam, the son of Beor, who was one of the Magi of ages before, and who lived by "the river of the land of the children of his people," which was none other than the Euphrates. Above all, in the roll of their order what greater name was there than that of Daniel himself, set at their head in Babylon's greatest day ? This Daniel had foretold, probably in their Babylonian books no less than in those of his own race, the very time of the coming of the "Son of Man." He had foretold how to Him who should come would be given "dominion,

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and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages should serve him," whose dominion was to be "an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed."

Could there, then, be any wonder, even in Babylonia, that this priestly and princely company should set out to pay homage to the promised king? Still less could there be so when, sure enough, the star that they had been watching for did blaze forth in that sky whose every lamp they knew, and in whose mystical influence on mortal affairs they and all their nation believed. It is now nearly three centuries since Kepler found out that Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction about the time of Christ's birth. He found not only this, but that they were in conjunction twice over, with an interval of some months between. This interval, it is agreed, would exactly coincide with the fact that the Wise Men lost sight of the star on their way to Herod, and then saw it again as they went from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Yet still how many people there are who try to twist the simple words of the Bible into a notion that the star moved with the caravan all the

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way from the east ! And, after all, what in the end is the use of contentious guessing, whether this way or that ? All we need to know is that the Wise Men did come—that we can picture them to ourselves in their nightly camp, far across the desert, sitting before their tents, gazing searchingly up at the same heavens whence the song of angels was even then making melody in the hearts of shepherds on the bleak Judean hills.

Now it seems hardly necessary to announce that the chief member of this first embassy of the Gentiles is indeed our old, familiar friend Santa Claus. He is only appearing for the time being under his other name of Melchior. One fancies him not only as the leader, but as the originator of the enterprise. One fancies him as one to whom in the evening of his days had come his life's mission. Doubtless, like the Faust of centuries to be, he had already spent a long life delving in the empty mines of a corrupted philosophy. Here was his last hope, clung to with a tenacity that youth can hardly understand—with the tenacity of old Pizarro on his last triumphant journey. All the wisdom of the world was Melchior's—its history, its

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creeds, its arts and sciences—but it was all to no purpose, “vanity of vanities”! Around him he saw the decay of the mightiest city, the mightiest empire ever known. The temples, the palaces, the “hanging gardens” of Babylon the Great, where were they now? Thrice conquered, thrice despoiled, not much of Babylon’s glory—its tree-lined streets, its golden images and painted houses—can have remained even then. Probably old Melchior foresaw that the time would come—as come it has—when its very site would be a mound-strewn waste, where men must dig to find even its ruins.

The world must have seemed very old to Melchior, who knew the wreckage of three empires. The ideal of power, of conquest—not much in that! And what did his religion teach him, even at its purest? A mystical conflict between God and the Adversary, the spirit of good and the spirit of evil, of light and of darkness, of life and death. But whence is mankind to draw comfort—man, with his sorrows, joys, hopes, ambitions, affections? Is he to be the mere toy of airy influences? Is his fate to be fixed by those cold stars before ever his will has spoken? Is his warm heart to find no cheering

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answer in all nature? Must it just cease to beat, and his eyes grow dark, and his pulse throb in his veins no more, and a handful of ashes be all that once was called by his name?

So old Melchior moved disconsolate amongst the many-purposed throng of the doomed city, and there was nothing to bring him hope, nothing to bring him rest. The new empire that had risen in the west—what was there about it which promised anything better or more lasting than the others? But now as he sits alone before his tent on the edge of the desert, looking up at the stars in that calm night when all the world was at peace, a new vision lightens his old eyes. This “Son of Man,” whose “dominion was to be for ever”! Could it be that here was He who should bring into being upon earth the “kingdom of heaven”—the kingdom of eternal joy, eternal love? Perhaps Melchior had heard more than those prophecies of Daniel. Perhaps he knew of the vision of Isaiah; perhaps the pæan of the Roman poet had reached his ears—or that Sibylline utterance upon which it was founded. Perhaps he knew that this “Son of Man,” this

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Babe who should be born, was indeed come with a message that others had dreamed of—that he should cause the lion and the wolf to lie down with the lamb, and that the reign of strife, of hatred, of all poisonous and malignant things, the reign of death itself, was to be ended at the last. In the light of these thoughts the stars themselves must have seemed to shine with a tenderer radiance. What, after all, if this life of man should have a meaning beyond itself—a happiness, an eternity of its own? It would not be more a mystery than they!

It stands, of course, to reason—unless the star had appeared beforehand—that the Wise Men must have arrived at least three months after the shepherds had gone back to their flocks from the little cave at Bethlehem, singing as they went the earliest of all Christmas carols. The calendar allows only twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany. This must mean either that the Magi came with miraculous speed, or, as is generally understood, that they took over a year to come. Anyhow, it is to a curious extent just because the two celebrations seem so close together that our Christmas feast happens to begin with one and end with

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the other. In truth, among the early Christians the Epiphany was "more Christmas than Christmas itself." People thought the homage of the Gentile kings to the Godhead so much more important than the mere physical birth of Christ. That is one of the reasons—though by no means the only one—why of old among the Puritans, and even now in Scotland and elsewhere, the true festival comes with the New Year. But here again one trenches upon a little topic of controversy that hardly matters to us for the present. This at least we know, that by the time the Magi came, the Holy Family—though still at Bethlehem, or returned thither—were no longer in the cave, but ensconced in a "house." One would still think of them as humble, poor, obscure. They were certainly destined to live through more than thirty quiet years in homely poverty at Nazareth. But happy they must have been. Their happiness is still faintly echoed in each home, no matter how lowly, when the great mystery of human life resolves itself into a little cry, a little striving of dimpled arms, and to a man and woman the whole meaning of creation is changed and glorified by the one tremendous

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thought—"Unto us a Child is born ; unto us a Son is given."

A maiden moder so mild
In cradle keep a knavē child
That softly sleep ; she sat and sang.

So goes the old carol, and upon some such homely scene the imagination of the world has for ever pictured the entry of the three Kings with all their splendid retinue—their turbaned slaves, their silks, embroideries, their cloth of gold and caskets of jewels, from which the treasures fall unheeded upon the bare earthen floor. With bowed heads they offer their emblematic gifts—gold to the King who was to be, frankincense to the Priest, myrrh to the Victim who was—though they did not know it—to win an eternal kingdom with His own blood. It is remarkable that so many of the old painters should bring into the picture not only the shepherds, but also the oxen who had paid their mute homage in the cave on the actual first Christmas Day. But is it not better, in a way, that we should think of the whole event as one ? What is a month or a year when we are concerned with the message of eternity ? The Shepherds, the Star, the Mother

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and Child, the Wise Men worshipping—to our hearts it is all one glorious vision, prepared for through all ages past, rejoiced over by all ages to come.

Always of the three, old Melchior is the centre and chief. Sometimes he will be speaking to the Babe, sometimes only kneeling at the cradle-side. It is possible that he alone understood. One can quite believe that to Gaspar, the young, fantastic, golden-haired gallant, it should seem but an unromantic reward for his desert journey, to be brought to pay homage to the new-born child of a poor and elderly village carpenter. As for swarthy Baltasar, one may be sure he had looked forward to proffering his jewelled casket before some more shining throne than the cradle at Bethlehem. But Melchior understood. Here at last was the answer to his questioning—unexpected, undreamt of in all those weary years of learning and pondering amidst Babylon's ruined splendours. In all the old religions, in all the old civilisations that he knew so well, there was but small thought for the sorrows and joys of the humble. Even upon the children of the rich, not much love was wasted; how much less

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upon the children of the poor ! Everywhere the struggle for mastery, for pomp. Envy, fear, gluttony and vice in high places, and for the weak and helpless the bread of bitterness and water of affliction, weeping and the gnashing of teeth ! Yet here, at this lowly hearth, was happiness—and “ of such,” by the showing of the promised star, was “ the kingdom of heaven.” As he greeted the grey-headed Joseph, a strange sympathy must have sprung up between the Wise Man of Babylon and his only compeer in age at that little gathering, the simple-hearted, untutored peasant from Nazareth. Did old Melchior, as he shared a father’s reverent joy, fully understand the new meaning, the new glory that this Child was to bring to fatherhood ? Did he understand that in this very symbol the eternal love—“ the dayspring from on high ” that he had sought so long—was to be awakened upon earth ? Did he know that this “ Son of Man,” who should teach men brotherly-kindness—who should teach them that they are members all of one great human family—should teach them also how they might pray together to no tyrannous, malignant deity, but to “ Our Father, which

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art in Heaven " ? Perhaps he may have understood something of it all. But we have yet to learn how long a time it was before the rest of the world even began to understand it too.

Here, in any case, is the first arrival in history of our hero, Santa Claus. He is to see many changes, both of fortune and of temperament, before we have done with him. So far as he was just one among the Magi we soon lose sight of him. It will be remembered that, "warned of God in a dream," they went back by a different way into their own country. No one knows what became of them there, though some would have it that they were baptized by the Apostle Thomas, and that one, at any rate, returned to be a witness of the Crucifixion. Perhaps they helped to spread the new gospel of love in war-worn old Babylon. Their bones were said to have been collected by St. Helena—how she identified them is not recorded. They were taken from place to place, and over them at last the great cathedral of Cologne rose by the banks of the Rhine. In the blazonry of Cologne their three crowns are still to be seen, and in a gorgeous shrine their skulls are set with velvet and with gems. Through all the Rhineland,

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amidst scenery curiously contrasted with their own Babylonian plains, they still follow the star upon the church steeples, in the shape of weathercocks. As far north as Poland they have special festivals and processions to themselves at Christmas-tide. In Provence, the children go out from the villages each Epiphany, carrying cakes and presents for the "Three Kings" of Cologne, who, they fancy, will come riding by with royal pomp—a dream that is realised sometimes, in an actual masquerade of country folk.

Moreover, there can be no manner of doubt that the first Christian origin of the bringing of gifts to children at Christmas is the celebration of the Magi's journey to Bethlehem. In Spain, and even in the New World, far over the Atlantic, of which the Wise Men were not supposed to know anything at all, each Christmas Eve, when the stars are out and the children snugly packed away in bed, you can see scores of tiny shoes standing in rows at the doors and windows of the houses. The little owners of these shoes steadfastly believe that every Christmas Eve the Wise Men will have to make their journey to Bethlehem all over again, with gifts to lay at

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childhood's feet. They believe, too, that on their way the Wise Men will have to pass down that very street. And, oddly enough, there must be some truth in it ; for when Christmas morning comes, those little shoes will be every one of them full of bon-bons and toys of the very latest make. Perhaps—and it would be strange if it were so—it is only one of the Wise Men who has managed to survive all these hundreds of years. It would be stranger still if he should prove to be the oldest of them all, and if his name should be Santa Claus !

As may be understood, however, even the Magi cannot be everywhere at once. In various places they have other helpers, and in Italy there is an old lady, Dame Befana, who does duty for them very well. She leaves her presents in a gift-room that is always specially prepared for the occasion. Somewhere in it is sure to be a little Crib—a model of the Bethlehem stable, with Joseph, and Mary, and the shepherds, and angels hanging over it, poised upon silver threads, just as in the churches. Dame Befana may be trusted as if she were Santa Claus himself, for she is a very old friend of the Magi—a friend of nearly two thousand years' standing. To tell

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the truth, it was at her house that they stayed once while they were on their way from the East, and they suggested that she should go with them. But she refused, saying that she had quite enough to do to look after her own household. After they had gone she repented, and that very night, taking gifts of her own, she crept out alone into the darkness. For years and years she wandered, seeking the Messiah, and it was long after He had died and risen again that she came, already bent with age, to Jerusalem. Ever since, to win atonement for that one day's refusal, she makes her way every Christmas Eve to any little home that Santa Claus cannot visit in person. There are many people who believe that Cinderella's fairy godmother was only old Dame Befana in disguise. But that is a long story, and as it is not exactly Santa Claus's own story, it must be left to tell itself in its own way.

SANTA CLAUS, THE SAINT

*Down his neck his reverend lockes
In comelye curls did wave ;
And on his aged temples grewe
The blossomes of the grave.* Percy Reliques.

By the shores of the Ascanian lake, only a few miles from the blue waters of the Sea of Marmora, amidst some of the most beautiful scenery in the world—beneath hills clothed with chestnut woods, and with the snow-capped Mysian Olympus raising its head to the clear sky beyond—there was once upon a time a noble city. Its walls were built foursquare. It had broad streets running to every point of the compass from the heart of it, and gardens and fountains and fine houses of marble and mosaic. Its site can still be traced. Its walls survive. Within them, huddled in the midst of a wilderness of ruins and undergrowth, a miserable Turkish village recalls in one syllable of its present name the glories of Nikaea. Upon its fallen towers, in very fact, the stork now makes its nest.

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But Nikaea wore a very different look in a lovely springtime, sixteen hundred years ago. It was in the height of its splendour. From one point of view, at any rate, it was the centre of the world, for all men's thoughts were turned to it. At Nicomedia hard by, a generation or so before, Diocletian, the peasant-born Emperor, had built himself a palace, where he might spend his old age in luxurious retreat amongst his native hills. Hither, to what had already become the real capital of the "Roman" world—for Constantinople was not yet built by the neighbouring Bosphorus—all-conquering Constantine had already come. Here he was to establish his hoped-for victorious peace, and to set up as the Imperial standard the banner of Christ. Every foe seemed to have been subdued. From the Imperial standpoint all was in order for the millennium to begin. But the heart of man proved still intractable. Constantine was to find his attention only transferred from warring pagans to quarrelling Christians. No sooner had persecution ceased, and Christianity become the world's official faith, than the Christians began the strife anew among themselves. Out of the schools of

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Alexandria arose the battle of words and dogmas around the "Arian heresy" that threw half mankind into a religious conflict as fierce as any before or since. So it came about that Nikaea—otherwise just one of the forgotten cities of Asia Minor—won for itself immortal fame. Is it not recalled every time the faithful church-goer takes out his Prayer Book and repeats the "Nicene creed"?

To us of these days, who know how tedious and hollow ecclesiastical conferences can be, it is difficult to understand the world-wide excitement that centred in Nikaea, when Constantine summoned the bishops to the "City of Victory." It was the first council of its kind. It was graced by the presence of the Emperor himself, who had chosen Nikaea as being near his own palace. The now-familiar points of controversy were not then worn with the quibbling of ages. They had just sprung forth in the mind of man—vivid and fresh revelations, bright with the radiance of new hopes, new ideas. The details of dogma were not mere traditional beliefs recommended for acceptance, but new-found facts, laden with possibilities for the future that baffled all im-

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aging—truths to fight for and to die for. They were, in a word, “news”—“news” that was vital to the welfare, both of body and soul, of every man and woman. For an official religion was not to be trifled with in the days of Constantine! Like other “news,” they were discussed everywhere in street and shop and market-place, and “lived upon the lips of men.” There were Montague-and-Capulet brawls between factions, and debates at every corner. As the historians tell us, if one asked for change one was met with the retort, “The Son is subordinate to the Father.” If a man asked whether his bath was ready he was told that “There was a time when He was not,” or that “The Son arose out of nothing.” And what was it all about? Apparently a mere theoretical squabble as to whether Christ, as the Second Person of the Trinity, could be at once the Son of the Father and yet have co-existed with Him from the beginning of time. Perhaps it seemed to matter very little to human conduct how these things were to be explained. But in those early days of the making of the Christian creed it was obvious enough what was at stake. On the Arian side there was the

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natural question of a reasoning mind. On the other was the tremendous principle of the necessity of faith. There was a "mystery" to be accepted—the mystery of the "Three in One"—lest Christianity should yield, as it had already shown signs of doing, to mankind's continual tendency towards the making of many gods.

Wherefore, along all the roads, from east and west and south and north—from Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Spain, Persia, Greece, Gaul, and the islands of the Mediterranean—came the bishops. There were three hundred and eighteen of them. They came at their Emperor's own behest to take counsel with him as to what the rest of men should believe for all time. The highways were all astir with their coming, for each bishop came with his retinue—carriages, horses, asses, baggage-mules, and each was allowed at least three presbyters and three slaves. They came, we are told, at full gallop, as bound for some purpose of life or death. In Nikaea itself one can imagine the excitement. Altogether there must have been over two thousand travellers arriving, and each of the bishops demanded specially distinguished lodging. Alas, even

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among the Christian bishops of the fourth century, envy, hatred, and malice had each its place. When Constantine arrived to open the council, the first thing that awaited him was a huge pile of letters. They came from the bishops, and they were all of them complaints and protests from one against the other. Constantine did one of the notable things of his life when he made a public bonfire of them.

And now let us take a peep inside the great building—probably a temple turned into a church—where the council meets. It is the very centre of the town, and to it lead the main avenues from each point of the compass. On a low throne sits Constantine himself, resplendent in golden armour and royal robe. He is a majestic figure, as even his enemies allowed, with flaming eye and glowing cheek—florid and dressy, perhaps, as we should consider now, but none the less the mightiest man in the world of his own time. Though Constantine saw fit to show himself to advantage before the representatives of his newly favoured Church, he was hardly equipped to take much personal part in the debate. As yet he was not even baptised. His is the somewhat bewildered

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interest of the layman and the soldier. His speeches are vague rhodomontade. Indeed, one does not know how much the unseen influence of his good mother, St. Helena, is responsible for his being there at all. Around him cluster in their various parties the bishops and their junior colleagues. They are as strangely mingled an array as ever gathered under one roof. Here are fair-haired Goths and black-skinned Arabs; young enthusiasts fresh-trained in all the latest dialectical subtilities; old, white-bearded pilgrims who had survived the persecution under Diocletian. Each of these bears upon his body the marks of torture, of the searing-iron and the rack. With characteristic diplomacy, Constantine does the old martyrs honour. He solemnly goes round and kisses their wounds—puts his lips to the sockets of the sightless eyes, to the nail-less fingers, to the severed sinews, the scars more eloquent than words. Some at least must have brought with them the simple heart—some for whom all the days of barren argument must have been a weariness alike to flesh and spirit. Of such was old Spyridion, the shepherd-bishop of Cyprus. He it was who, when he found

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out some robbers in the very act of stealing a sheep, gave them one, saying it was "a pity they should have been out all night for nothing." It was Spyridion, too, whose humble mules—a black one and a white one—were ridiculed by some other bishops who caught him up at a wayside inn on the road to Nikaea. For a joke they cut off the heads of the mules during the night, and thought to leave poor old Spyridion behind on the following day. But Spyridion quietly put their heads back, and by the special favour of heaven the mules came to life again. It was not till the old bishop had reached Nikaea that he found he had put the black head on the white mule, and the white head on the black one.

In all the company there are two chief figures around whom the battle of words rage. Both of them are Alexandrians. One is the diminutive and hitherto unknown young deacon to Bishop Alexander. This young deacon was soon to take upon himself the whole burden of the defence of the pure doctrine of the Trinity. He was to triumph even against the leanings of Constantine. He was to defy the might of the whole Roman Empire. After a long life of

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stupendous labour and activity he was to leave behind him an imperishable name—the name of the great St. Athanasius who was “against the world.” The other is in complete contrast. It is Arius himself, the source of all the trouble. In place of the little stature, the keen wit, the subtle, practical mind of Athanasius, Arius strikes one as a giant fanatic. He is tall, gaunt, unkempt, with a shock-head of hair. His manners are violent and hysterical. He writhes with swollen veins in paroxysms of excitement. He seems, indeed, altogether the worst possible exponent of a logical attitude. He would sometimes dance round the hall, and whilst he capered, sing his theological catchwords to popular tunes of the day. In short, he appears to have anticipated our own Salvation Army in more ways than one.

Yet it is neither of these two leaders of debate that we ourselves have come there to find. It is an old bishop whose presence is not attested in any of the official lists. But he was undoubtedly at the council, for the one incident in its long sitting that has really lived in the memory of man—the one that is always faithfully recorded in traditional pictures—has him

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for its hero. And who else should he be but our old friend, Santa Claus ! He has changed a good deal since he started out from old Babylon on his pilgrimage through the desert to the manger at Bethlehem. There is now none of the grave, world-weary look that Melchior wore. He is a hearty, joyous old fellow. His flowing white beard and hair enshrine much the same rosy face that we see in our mind's eye to-day when we think of Santa Claus. To give him his full style and title, he is Bishop Nicholas of Myra, one of the oldest and most respected bishops there. But he is not much of a debater. The subtleties of theology mean little to him now. He does not need to argue ; he knows. So it came about that one day, when Arius was more than usually aggressive and irritating with his doctrinal quibblings, old Bishop Nicholas just got up in his place and gave him a box on the ear ! Even considering Arius's own goings-on, this was a terrible outburst to be guilty of in a grave council of bishops, before the very eyes of the Roman Emperor. They say, indeed, that for a time Nicholas was deprived of his mitre and pall because of it. There are those, on the other hand, who think that

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from some points of view it was the most sensible thing that was done throughout the conference. It was in its way a reproof not only to Arius, but to the whole gathering. Here were three hundred and eighteen would-be leaders of the world's thought, wrangling over abstruse definitions of the divinity of Christ, when by their very actions they showed a complete ignorance of the very elements of His teaching. Here they were, chopping words and phrases, full of pride, contention, pedantry, vainglory, intriguing for power and authority and the favours of the Emperor in his golden armour! Was this the wisdom of the Babe of Bethlehem? Were these fit guides to the kingdom which none might enter save those who had become "as a little child"? Even from the theological point of view that box on the ear might well have settled the discussion. To this day, the Athanasian Creed merely translates it into the word "must." To this day, too, by a curious coincidence, when the candidate for confirmation kneels before the bishop in a Catholic church, not the least solemn and remembered part of the ceremony is a "blow on the cheek," given by the bishop at the words "Peace be with

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you!" So the Nicene message of old Santa Claus has not been forgotten, box on the ear and all!

For the present, however, we must content ourselves with just recalling who this remarkable old man was, and how he came to be there. Myra was, of course, a celebrated port of Lycia, the fairest sea-coast province of Asia Minor, looking southward over the Mediterranean to the island of Cyprus. It had already distinguished itself in Christian annals by giving to the world St. Thecla, the young friend and disciple of St. Paul. In her eighteenth year, pure and beautiful as a "lily of Sharon," she had been thrown in vain to the lions, who would do no more than tenderly caress her feet. Old Nicholas himself was a native of the neighbouring city of Patara, famous for a fine natural harbour, thronged with ships from Africa and Europe. Unfortunately, in St. Nicholas's young days, it was by no means notorious for sanctity. It was given over to the worship of Apollo, whose oracle spent the winter months there, after remaining through the summer at Delos. Even the priests of Apollo seem to have recognised the value of change of air. Anyhow, Apollo possessed a

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splendid temple at Patara, the glories of which had been hymned by Horace and Virgil. It was still in full honour when a son and heir came to bless a respectable young couple of well-to-do and charitable citizens, worthy to become the earthly father and mother of Santa Claus. From his earliest hours young Nicholas showed himself no ordinary child. It is said that on the very first day he stood up patiently to be washed—a lesson to all naughty little people who give their nurses trouble. When he was still at the breast he always fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays, only taking nourishment once on those days, and then only towards the evening. But it was not until he was a young man that he gave signs of being one of the first saints fully to understand the meaning and beauty of the story of Bethlehem. It was by no marvels of austerity, by no solitary sojourn in the desert, by no elaboration of doctrine, that St. Nicholas came to be—long before the days of the “little poor man” of Assisi—the especial saint of the people, of the poor, of young girls, schoolboys, and children, of outcasts, “unfortunates,” travellers, sailors, even of thieves—of all, in short, whom arrogance and

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authority pass thoughtlessly by, of all who, "in this harsh world, draw their breath in pain."

The most famous incident perhaps of all his early life was that in which he saved the three daughters of a poor merchant of Myra from a life of shame. Though of good family, they had grown so poor that only this hope was left to them. As it chanced, Nicholas heard of their plight. Softly by night he stole to the window of their house and threw in a purse of gold. The poor merchant, thinking it a gift from heaven, was overjoyed, and decided that this should be the dowry of his eldest daughter. The next night St. Nicholas came again and threw in another purse of gold. This was apportioned to the second daughter, with all due thanks to the mysterious source. Lastly, St. Nicholas came a third time, and threw in yet another purse, so that all three daughters were now saved from a fate which, in an Asiatic city of those wanton days, lay all too often in waiting for an undowered maid. Those three golden purses, transfigured into three golden apples, appear in every representation of St. Nicholas. By a long chain of circumstances,



He stole to the window . . . and threw in a purse of gold.

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through the Lombard merchants, they have come to be a familiar sign to the poor even of to-day, in the three golden balls that hang over each pawnbroker's shop. From that time forth, too, St. Nicholas has been the particular protector and patron saint of young girls. It is even said—not quite rightly, as we have seen,—that the whole idea of Santa Claus as the bringer of gifts to young folk has come from this little story.

There is, however, a companion proof of St. Nicholas's care for his young friends in Myra, and one hardly less famous. For one day it so happened that a gentleman of Constantinople sent his two—or, as the pictures always show us, three—sons to crave benediction from Myra's renowned bishop on their way to Athens. The anxious father gave each of them ample money for their journey, and they had still plenty left when they arrived at an inn not far from St. Nicholas's lodging—for St. Nicholas lived in humble, unostentatious fashion. As it was late, they decided to stay the night. They little knew what was in store for them ! Seeing how well provided they were, the wicked landlord conceived the plan of murdering them in

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their sleep and appropriating their money. Not only so, but he hit upon the still more horrible design of cutting their bodies into little pieces, putting them in the salting-tub, and then selling them for pickled pork. The poor boys were already chopped into pieces, and salted in the tub when, next morning, who should turn up but St. Nicholas? He had seen what had happened in a vision, and boldly charged the landlord with the crime. Meanwhile, by miraculous power, he brought the boys' limbs together again, even after their night's soaking in the brine, and the three came out whole and well as from a bath. The landlord is said to have repented, and to have been promised forgiveness by St. Nicholas, while the three boys lived happily ever after. Whether or no they married the three poor girls whom St. Nicholas had helped with the golden purses is not known, but it is quite possible that they did, and that the name of the good St. Nicholas was blessed in time by an ever-growing circle of little ones round three family boards.

There is yet another story of St. Nicholas and his tenderness to young folk which deserves

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to be told with the other two. It is strangely overlooked in most popular accounts of the old saint's sojourn here below, but is specially significant, as it happened at the actual ceremony of St. Nicholas's consecration to the see of Myra. The ordeal was practically at an end, and St. Nicholas was gravely turning to make his last solemn prayers before the altar. Suddenly the congregation were startled by piercing screams. A distracted woman rushed up the aisle, and threw herself at St. Nicholas's feet. While the rest of the assembly were at a loss to know who she might be, the good saint soon recognised her. She was none other than his landlady, the tenant of a small house in a poor quarter of the town where he was still content to dwell. Tenderly raising her to her feet, the new bishop learnt the reason of her trouble. She had, it appeared, forsaken her household duties for a few minutes through her desire to be present at the great function. She had not been able to resist this opportunity of seeing the courteous stranger, whom she had known merely as, so to speak, "the gentleman in the parlour," raised to the dignity of the episcopate. As the ceremony progressed she had slipped off

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home, only to find that her little boy, with whom St. Nicholas had often played while his always frugal fare was in preparation, had fallen into the fire, and was burnt almost to a cinder. St. Nicholas did not hesitate a moment. Leaving all the processional splendours that awaited him, and ignoring the acclaiming crowds, he hurried from the place with genuine concern. Forthwith he sought out the ignoble but familiar hearth, and restored his little friend to life and happiness.

As with this, so with all the stories of St. Nicholas and his attitude towards the little members of his flock, there is a delightful homeliness which easily explains how he came to be, first and foremost, the children's saint. Hardly had he been laid reverently in his grave after his long life was over, than all the parents in Myra, and soon of the world in general, began to make little presents to their children each 6th of December, the day on which he found rest. In remembrance of the kindly stealth with which our saint helped the three maidens of Myra out of their difficulty, the idea of leaving these modest offerings overnight as St. Nicholas's own gifts soon came into

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being. With the popularity of St. Nicholas, the celebration of his day spread by leaps and bounds. In the mediæval convents throughout Italy, France, and in England as well, the young girls who were being taught there used to hang out their stockings just as the children do to-day, and never failed to find them stuffed next morning with sweetmeats and trinkets. In Italy the festival was sometimes called "Zopata," and instead of their stockings the young people would put out their shoes and slippers, just as the little protégées of the Magi do in Spain, whence probably both the word and the notion were borrowed.

This, however, was by no means all. St. Nicholas was champion not only of children in general, but also of that supposedly graceless and incorrigible personage, the schoolboy. Even now, any young hopeful of the playground who is being bullied or beaten in a fight and who calls a truce by shouting "Nix!" is probably, all unconsciously, calling upon the name of his ever-watchful friend and patron, Santa Claus. Before Christianity in England was a couple of centuries old, there was already flourishing here as well as all over Europe the custom whereby

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on St. Nicholas's Day a "boy-bishop" was elected in every cathedral town and almost in every parish—generally from among the choir-boys. From St. Nicholas's Day right on to Christmas and beyond, the "boy-bishop" held mock-court. He climbed into the pulpit and preached mock-sermons. Some of these still exist, and poor, priggish stuff they are! In due episcopal robes, with mitre and crosier, he went in procession through the town, followed by canons and choristers. He performed all ceremonies—even Mass, according to some—just as if he were bishop indeed. In Salisbury Cathedral is still a monument to one of these young prelates, who died during the brief glories of his office. Not until Henry VIII's time was the fashion put an end to, and endless are the records of the mad frolics that used to go forward during those three topsy-turvy weeks. It is said that the "Montem"—the now-abolished procession of the Eton boys to Salt Hill, graced so often by the presence of King George III—was a survival of the festival. Undoubtedly the learned Dean Colet expressly ordained for the boys of his own St. Paul's School that "all these children shall, every Childermass Day,

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come to Paul's Church, and hear the Child-bishop's sermon." One need not go into the long question of the connection of the "boy-bishop" with the "miracle-plays" and "mysteries" and crude beginnings of our religious drama. One need not, either, worry much about his kinship with the Lord of Misrule and the Abbot of Unreason, with the Feast of the Ass and the Feast of Fools and other grown-up affairs. To tell the truth, these last happened generally between Christmas and Twelfth Night, and do seem to have degenerated in the course of time into unbecoming orgies. But there is just one little matter associated with the "boy-bishops" that must have gladdened the heart of old St. Nicholas, if one may fancy him looking down from the balcony of heaven upon the efforts of his all-too-unworthy disciples. This was that at certain stated times during the "boy-bishop's" reign children were allowed to play games in the church itself. Here at least was a thought worthy of Santa Claus! After all, what purer praise, what sweeter incense could well be offered up at the Throne of Grace than the sound of children's laughter? Who shall pretend

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that even the holiest fane could be defiled by the innocent joy of the Christ-child's little brothers and sisters, "whose angels do perpetually behold the face of their Father" ?

We are coming, as may have been noticed, nearer and nearer to the Santa Claus of our own times ; but there is a good deal that we have to remember before we renew his acquaintance in wholly modern guise. We remember that he was not only the patron saint of children, but also of those children of a larger growth who are in need of his simple-hearted self, of his loving sympathy with all who are in evil case, no matter how poor, no matter how deeply "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes." He was, as we have seen, the patron of thieves, many of whom, by kindly brotherliness, he led into better paths. Was he not in this a true follower of his Master, whose last promise was to the dying malefactor that he should be "this day with Me in Paradise" ? In the old days of highwaymen and footpads these gentry went familiarly by the name of "the clerks of St. Nicholas." There have been some mistaken folk who have imagined that "Old Nick" himself was just a perversion

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of our good saint. This, of course, is quite wrong, "Old Nick" being simply the sinister monarch of the "necks" or water-sprites. But by a strange contrast, St. Nicholas has also come to be the patron of some clerks of a very different order. In a quiet little hall in the heart of London, where the mellow light of the afternoon streams through stained-glass windows upon oaken beam and wainscot—for the place is very ancient—a little body of meek, unassuming old men gather every month to chant a solemn doxology in honour of St. Nicholas. They are the Worshipful Company of Parish Clerks—dwindled, perhaps, since those far-off sunny days when all the world went to see their pageant-plays by the babbling springs of Clerkenwell. Their glory has departed, even since the good old times of "Tate-and-Brady," and the "three-decker" pulpit. Yet are they still true and fit servants of Santa Claus, the old, poor man of the simple soul!

Then one must not forget that as patron-saint of the vast Russian Empire—not to mention little corners of the world like Lorraine—St. Nicholas is still true to his character. It is not only the Emperor upon his throne who does

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honour to the Bishop of Myra's much-loved name. Every Russian peasant looks upon St. Nicholas as his especial friend and champion. It is St. Nicholas who guides the plough, St. Nicholas who swells the corn, St. Nicholas who blesses the cottage-hearth. There is a significant story told of how he protected a poor Russian farmer against the revenges of no less distinguished an Old Testament notability than Elijah, who appears to be regarded with almost terrified veneration in the dominions of the Tsar. The farmer, it seemed, had not paid sufficient attention to Elijah. As St. Nicholas and the stern Tishbite were taking a walk round the farm, Elijah remarked that he was thinking of blasting the corn in one particular field, just to teach the farmer to treat him with proper respect. St. Nicholas said nothing, but after Elijah had gone off St. Nicholas went quietly to the farmer, and told him to go and sell his field as promptly as possible to the local priest of Elijah. The farmer there and then did as St. Nicholas bade him, and sold the field just as it stood, at a very fair price. Sure enough St. Nicholas and Elijah were taking another walk in the neighbourhood a few days after. It was

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noticed that the field in question was now all beaten down by the rain and wind. "You see," said Elijah, "what disasters I can bring about on those who neglect me!" "I see," said St. Nicholas; "but of course you know that this particular field has just been bought by your own priest!"

But more than all, apart from his joyous labours as the children's saint, old St. Nicholas is to be remembered as the patron of sailors, and of all travellers by sea. In the busy, hill-girdled harbour of Myra itself, even to his last days, the old Bishop went hither and thither among the rough seafaring folk as one of themselves. He could have taken a "master-mariner's" certificate as surely as the most weather-beaten old captain who plied the Mediterranean in calm and storm. There are countless stories told of how St. Nicholas would come to the rescue of some helpless little craft far out at sea when all hope was gone. He was no mere fair-weather saint. He shared the simplest seaman's joys and toils. Once, so they say, there was a merchantman bound from Egypt in sore straits off the coast of Cyprus. Whether it was that "there arose against it the tempestuous wind,

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called Euroclydon," as happened to the bark that bore St. Paul to Rome, there is no means of telling. Enough that, as then, "in many days neither sun nor stars appeared," and the ship, running adrift at the mercy of the winds and the waves, was every moment in danger of being dashed upon the rocks. Huge seas came thundering over the deck, and in the midst of the gale the very steersman was swept from his place into the sea. All had given themselves up for lost, and were of a mind to make their last prayers, when a sudden lightning-flash showed another figure at the helm, white-bearded, cheery, and rosy-faced, upon whom the whole force of the tempest hurled itself in vain. Soon after, in a marvellous way, the storm abated, whilst with ready skill the bluff old seaman guided the ship into safety. Clouds packed away, the sun shone out, and the once-wild waters lay calm and sparkling on every hand. Then the mysterious helmsman gave up his post. The sailors were crowding round with wondering gratitude. At that moment, in the most unaccountable fashion, the old man disappeared as suddenly as he had come. What had happened to him none could say. There



A sudden lightning-flash showed another figure at the helm.

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was nothing to show that he had thrown himself overboard—indeed, the captain and crew could hardly believe their eyes that he was not there still. Certainly he was gone, and not a man in the ship ever saw him again. But curiously enough, when they came sailing safe into Myra, and went to the church to give thanks for their preservation, they seemed to recognise an astonishing likeness to the features of their wonderful old pilot in those of the venerable Bishop Nicholas himself !

What wonder that alike in Europe and Asia, wherever men go down to the sea in ships, there the good St. Nicholas finds honour due ? There is hardly a seaport town in any Christian land, along some coasts hardly a village where “the stately ships go by, to the haven under the hill,” that cannot boast a church of St. Nicholas, often hung with simple offerings from the sailors themselves. His very bones were claimed by sailors—sailors of a merchant-fleet from the famous old sea-town of Bari, in the heel of Italy. They made a sort of pirate-crusade to the coast of Lycia, broke open St. Nicholas’s coffin, and brought his body in triumph to the shores of the Adriatic. There, in a splendid crypt

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beneath the church, his remains still lie. There every year upon St. Nicholas's Day the mariners of Bari take his image upon a ship far out to sea. It rests upon the Adriatic's bosom until nightfall, when the sails are set once more, and the ship with its precious burden makes for the land. In solemn procession the image is brought into the church upon the shoulders of sailors, amidst the glow of torches and the chanting of litanies by countless pilgrims from the country-side all round. So every year, between a sunrise and a sunset, the sailors' saint is borne out from the little Italian town upon the sea that he loved—every year, till once and for ever, the day shall arrive when “that which drew from out the boundless deep, turns again home.”

It is strangely true to the character of St. Nicholas that this is the only religious ceremony in Italy that is entirely in the hands of the people, and in which the dignitaries of the church take no part at all. From any other point of view it may seem at first sight to have nothing in particular to do with Christmas, or the message that Christmas brings. But it has, none the less. For in the sailor's simple faith,

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St. Nicholas is for ever companioned by no less gracious and sacred a figure than that of the Maiden Mary herself, "the Star of the Sea," whose pure shining guides the mariner through lonely watches of the night. Somehow or other the sea has found its way even into the story of Christ's birth in Bethlehem's manger. What has geography to do with matters like these? Has not Bethlehem transformed itself long ago in the world's thought into a little haven, emblem of the haven where all would be? So at least the old song tells us:—

I saw three ships come sailing in,
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day!
I saw three ships come sailing in
On Christmas Day in the morning!

And what was in those ships all three,
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day?
Our Saviour Christ, and His Lady,
On Christmas Day in the morning!

O they sailed into Bethlehem
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day!
O they sailed into Bethlehem
On Christmas Day in the morning!

And He did whistle, and she did sing,
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day!
And all the bells on earth did ring
On Christmas Day in the morning!

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As one gazes in fancy at the first of those "three ships" that "came sailing into Bethlehem," in the frosty sunshine, with music in the air, one seems to see at its helm a snowy-haired old man, hale and joyous. Can it be the same old Santa Claus who came to save the Egyptian sailors at their last need amidst the horrors of darkness and the storm?

SANTA CLAUS, THE PAGAN

*He, the All-Father—
He, the World-Wanderer—
Over all other gods
Ruleth in Asgard,
Teaching men wisdom.* Ethics of the Eddas.

WE must go now many a long mile afield in search of another—yet, in an odd way, the same—Santa Claus. We shall have to leave behind us the mountains of Judea and the manger at Bethlehem, Nikaea's chestnut woods and Myra's sunlit harbour. We shall have to turn our faces to the grim north. We must brave its biting winds, its towering storm-clouds, black with hail and snow. We may even have to climb right up through the cloud-rack itself, to the very heart of the splendour that we can see beyond, shining over its rim. If we can find our way through, and away to a certain clear, airy summit beneath which the whole world is spread as a map, we may, if he is at home, make the acquaintance of a very

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mighty potentate indeed, whose especial golden throne is hereabouts. He is so vast that we cannot see him all at once ; but if we look at him, as one might say, through the wrong end of the telescope, we shall find that he is, in reality, an old man, with a long white beard, a broad-brimmed hat, a many-coloured cloak, and only one eye ! He has some curious companions. Upon his shoulders sit two ravens, his counsellors ; two wolves couch at his feet, and at hand stands an eight-footed steed ready to carry him to the ends of the earth in a moment of time. This new acquaintance of ours has over two hundred names, but most of us will have recognised him soon enough as Odin, the world-wanderer, the father of the old Norse gods. He is, we may remember, the god both of battle and of wisdom. He it is who sends forth his valkyries to fetch the fallen viking from the fight, and bring him, fresh-slain as he lies, to feast eternally in the clashing halls of Valhalla. He it is who gave learning and letters to men, and left one of his own eyes in pawn in Mimer's fountain so that he should be wise for ever. Yet he is a wanderer still, and amongst the thousand guises that he takes

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upon himself is very often just that of our old friend and hero Santa Claus !

We all know, of course, the debt that our so-called " old-fashioned " Christmas owed to the pagan feast of Yule—common in most of its features to both Celt and Norseman. With it, under one name or another, Odin had generally a very great deal to do. It would be ridiculous to pretend, despite all his respectable Christian associations, that old Santa Claus, with his flowing white beard and crown of evergreens, had really no connection at all with this venerable patriarch of the Gothic pantheon, to whom we still dedicate the middle day of the week. We know that apart from the horrible element of human sacrifices, the old Yuletide festival of our woad-clad ancestors has been to all intents and purposes simply continued throughout the centuries under Christian auspices. We know about the cutting and hanging aloft of the mistletoe, and probably of the holly and the rowan too, the bringing in and kindling of the Yule-log, the trowling of the wassail bowl, and all the feasting and junketing that made it " merry in hall when the beards wagged all." We know that all this " old English " Christmas jollity

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was just a survival, amplified by Roman, Dane, Saxon, and Norman with kindred rites of their own, of the days when the Druid, "hoary chief," priest of Tutanés, the Celtic Odin, and white-bearded like his master, presided over a fiercer and more gruesome carnival beneath the sacred oak.

As it happens, Odin might easily have changed places with St. Nicholas himself in many a familiar adventure. As patron of mariners and queller of the tempest, to be sure, St. Nicholas was to the Greeks and Romans a curiously handy alternative to their own Poseidon and Father Neptune, in whose temples just such votive offerings as now do honour to St. Nicholas were wont to hang. But for the Norse warriors, roaming their grey seas with scant knowledge of Neptune and his trident, Odin was an all-sufficient patron, ever ready to overrule on their behalf the turbulence of Aeger and the other sea-gods, who owed him fealty. This he did for Sigurd Sigmundson, who sailed upon a dragon-ship, with a band of young warriors, against the sons of Hunding. A storm arose, but Sigurd, who was bravest of the brave, ordered that the sails should not be



He rides Odin's white horse, swift as the wind.

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taken down even though the wind should split them, but rather be hoisted higher. Thereupon, in the very midst of the storm, Odin came aboard in the guise of an old mariner. He steered the ship into safety, and then vanished, for all the world as St. Nicholas did when he came to the rescue of the Egyptians on the Cyprian coast.

Even in the homeliest celebrations of our modern Christmas one may still trace old Odin's memory. Thus for the little folk of Norway and Sweden, Santa Claus has no time to stuff stockings and shoes, for he rides Odin's own white horse, swift as the wind. He just drops his presents down the chimney as he rushes by, so that they lie in the morning all higgledy-piggledy round the grate. Then in some other northern countries there are all sorts of strange attendants that Santa Claus brings with him. Nearly all of them have been traced in one way or another to Odin's habit of wandering about the world in company with Loke, his rascally but often friendly brother from the nether-world. There is something of this idea mixed up even with the beautiful tradition by which, in Northern Germany, the Christ-child himself

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—the “Kristkindlein,” which little American tongues have twisted into “Krishkinkle”—brings the Christmas presents to his little brothers and sisters. He comes at midnight, when everyone is asleep, with the star of Bethlehem shining over his head and lighting up the whole room with a heavenly radiance. No one ever sees the Christ-child, but his two servants turn up afterwards and do duty for him, sometimes together, sometimes one without the other. These two servants are old Pelsnichol—as the North German children call their Santa Claus, because of his long fur cloak—and Knecht Ruprecht, or Servant Rupert, a flaxen-haired visitor, with big top-boots, a white robe, and mask. Sometimes old Pelsnichol has already come unseen with the Christ-child, and while the Christ-child leaves gifts behind for the good children, old Pelsnichol leaves a little birch for the bad ones. Sometimes, on the other hand, either old Pelsnichol or Knecht Ruprecht, or both, will arrive afterwards in full costume, and the children will be drawn up in a row and sternly questioned, and there will be toys and sugar-candy for those who have been good, but a switch for those who have not.

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So again in Holland, friend Santa Claus—not on Christmas Eve, but on his own birthday three weeks before—brings with him a black servant, Jan Haas, who gives out the presents from a big black bag, and goes out grinning after he has heard the children recite. In some parts of Switzerland, Santa Claus has another black companion, whose name is Schmutzli. This Schmutzli is a far more terrible fellow than Jan, for he brings with him a huge empty sack, and if any children have not been everything that they ought to have been, he threatens to put them in the sack and take them to the cemetery, where they will have nothing to eat but dry bones. There is a hardly less fearful judgment that Santa Claus has to dispense in Roumania, where he puts in an appearance in full canonicals as Bishop of Myra. After him comes a little boy with a lighted lamp, and if the children have not been good their poor little hands are popped into the flame, just to give them a foretaste of what will be in store for them if they go on being naughty all the rest of their lives. In Belgium, Santa Claus's servant is called Nicodemus; but it is in the Tyrol, where Klaubauf is the dreaded henchman's name,

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that the children get off better than anywhere else. Doubtless that is because the Tyrolese always lay out two suppers on Santa Claus's night—an elaborate meal, with the choicest wine, for Santa Claus, and a good hunk of cheese and some schnapps for Klaubauf. Perhaps it is in the old Swiss town of Freiburg that they make the most of Santa Claus himself, and at the same time are frankest of all about his companion. For there, in full robes, with mitre and crosier, St. Nicholas comes down the mountain-path every year, with a procession of all sorts of attendant folk, choristers and pipers and banner-bearers and garlanded villagers. By his side is a fantastic comrade carrying a switch. This fellow-wayfarer with Santa Claus bears at Freiburg no less redoubtable a name than that of Beelzebub, the very Baal whose prophets Elisha slew, the Odin of the south, the once all-powerful but long-dethroned deity of the Canaanites. Like so many of the "gods grown old," he has been first of all superseded as a god, and then counted as just a synonym for "the Evil One"!

Surest, however, of all pagan survivals is the Christmas-tree itself—the Christmas-tree that

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Martin Luther decked out so famously in his defiant home—the Christmas-tree that has found its way with such universal acceptance into our own English households since Queen Victoria and her Prince Consort brought it over from Germany and established it at their own royal hearth. In point of fact, there had been Christmas-trees in England long before then. Henry VIII set up a most costly one, with leaves of beaten gold, in his palace at Windsor. It was merely a question of popularity so far as this country was concerned. But that is a small matter compared with the far more important truth that the Christmas-tree carries us back to a time before Odin, before Baal, to the very earliest dawn of the religious instinct in man. It reminds us that talk of pagan gods and pagan rites is very much on the surface. Far beneath it all lies the simple fact that Christmas from time immemorial was a nature-festival, sprung of man's primeval watching over the mysteries of life and light, and over the annual re-birth of both, heralded with never-failing promise by the winter solstice. There is, of course, hardly a religion in the world—certainly no Aryan religion—that does not take

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us back to the old tree-worship. In the Gothic mythology, as we all know, the whole of existence was likened to a tree—Odin's tree, the ash Ygdrasil, cherisher of all life, whose roots were spread far beneath the world, whose branches reached above the heavens, and embowered the dwellings of the gods. The ash is still strangely sacred. As we have already seen, the fire before which Christ was swaddled in the cave at Bethlehem was of ash-wood, and in the old "merry Christmas" days a bundle of ash-faggots bound with nine bands was in some parts of the country still brought in and burnt each Christmas-tide, lit by a maid whose name had to be Mary. As each band burst, the Christmas cups were quaffed and a verse of a Christmas carol sung. So, too, the mistletoe was sacred to the old Norsemen. It was the mistletoe from whose wood alone could be made an arrow that might slay Balder, the spirit of summer, destined none the less to live gloriously again. To the Druids, as we have long learnt, this "golden bough," surviving amidst bare branches throughout all the rigours of the winter, seemed to be in itself the very soul of the sacred oak, which thus should never die, but would go

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on bearing its leaves and fruit for ever. Even now, when boy and girl snatch their furtive kisses beneath the little twig that hangs in the suburban hall, what do they do but pay youth's tribute to the eternal symbol of fertility? So again, not only in our northern lands, but throughout Southern Europe and Asia, the Christmas-tree links us everywhere with old, outworn creeds—with Apollo's oak at Dodona and the tree before which the ancient Assyrian kings offer their ungainly homage, in braided beards, upon the sculptured stones of Nineveh.

In like manner, it is but touching the shell of the thing to tell of the connection between our traditional English Christmas and the revelries of the Roman Saturnalia. In time, at least, these last coincided strangely both with the Druids' sacrificial rites and the convivial Yuletide feasts of the Danes and Saxons. How much Christmas owes to the Saturnalia can hardly be exaggerated. The exchange of presents, the breaking down, for the time being, of all barriers of class—even to the extent of masters waiting upon their servants—the decking of houses with evergreens, the mummeries, the masques, even the very candles that we still

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burn on our Christmas-trees—all had their prototypes in the Saturnalia. Though it may have been riotous, it was at least free from cruelty—this feast of Saturn that the Roman colonist celebrated in our little island, far from his own fireside gods, while the British representatives of Santa Claus were dipping their golden sickles in children's blood. At the same time, what was the Saturnalia itself but a late echo of a far older and far simpler festival? Perhaps it was the echo of some common parent to all those three strangely different Christmas feasts which had been blended around British hearths long before Christmas itself was heard of. As we know, apart from Saturn himself, nearly all the features of the Saturnalia of which the Augustan classics tell us were borrowed from the Greeks, and the Greeks had borrowed them—from where? Can it be that once again we must drag in “that blessed word, Mesopotamia”? Sure it is that ages before either Greece or Rome had won each its destined glories—probably long before Goths or Celts had made their conquering way to the forests and seas of the north-west—the fires of Christmas were being lit in honour of the sun-god upon

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those same Babylonian plains whence Santa Claus was to set forth long afterwards upon his journey to the manger-side at Bethlehem. The Wise Men of the East had already burnt their Yule-log—lighting it, perhaps, in orthodox fashion with the charred end saved from the previous year—some forty centuries before our worthy ancestors sat down to their first Christian feasts on English ground. It is even possible that Santa Claus was thriving earlier still in ancient Egypt. What else means the old hieroglyph of the sun-ship—common to the Egyptian tombs of over six thousand years ago and to the Celtic burial-stones of our own islands? Like the old Egyptian sun-god, so Odin too was carrier of souls across the waters of death to the realm of the hereafter. Such also is thought to have been the belief of the Druids—those Magi of the west, learned as they were in the motions of the heavenly bodies—regarding that particular mystic deity of theirs whom they found reason to celebrate at Christmas-tide. One gathers that the vision of Santa Claus at a ship's helm, which we have recalled more than once, has not been without its meaning through the ages!

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Others have found this same old master of the Christmas feast duly represented in the religion of ancient Mexico. Probably one would only find him cropping up the more often, the farther one went in search of him through time and place. For all comes to this, that wherever men have lived and thought and worshipped, the winter solstice has brought them face to face with nature's revival at the sun's return, and with the joyous symbol that it affords of a life after death for man himself. Setting aside all the mystic personalities that have clustered around Christmas in the world's imagination, it is amazing sometimes how near are even our own Christmas fancies to nature's impersonal self. There is, for instance, the universal pause at Christ's birth about which all Christian poets have sung and of which every tradition tells. We read how, on the holy night, all nature was at rest—"the earth in solemn silence lay," the ravening beasts couched harmless in their dens, the winds were hushed, the birds of prey perched by their nests as in a night-long trance. Even in later days the old thought survived, with a difference. Nature is no longer hushed, but the spell is still there. Hackneyed though they

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may be, the famous lines from "Hamlet" are inevitable :—

Some say, that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long ;
And then, they say, no spirit can walk abroad ;
The nights are wholesome ; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is the time.

There are, one may note, other things happening while Marcellus records this reverent Christian belief amidst the chill and haunted silence of that Christmas night upon the ramparts of Elsinore. In the castle within, King Claudius is celebrating the Yuletide feast in true old Norse fashion, with "heavy-headed revel" and other customs "more honoured in the breach than the observance." But, as it happens, this universal pause at Christmas is by no means confined to Christian legend. It is to be found in the lore of almost every nation, east and west—even in that of the North American Indians. Do not the classic "halcyon days" tell the same tale? They were the fourteen days, one remembers, at the winter solstice, when all the seas were still, and "birds of calm

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sat brooding on the charmed wave." Doubtless the kingfisher had less than nothing to do with it all. Still, it is difficult to believe that there can be no foundation whatever for this world-wide tradition about the calm of Christmas-time. It is a tradition, at least, that science has not wholly overthrown. Enough, in any case, that somehow or other, mankind has everywhere and at all times seen something in nature itself at the winter solstice to create this Christmas message, this Christmas thought, of peace.

How excellent, then, so far as it goes, is this pagan Christmas of man and nature, of trees and seas and beasts and birds, and of returning warmth and light. But it is curious how strangely unsatisfying it has proved in its celebrations. For some reason or other, even in the light of Christianity itself, it was this Christmas, and practically this Christmas alone, that we in England celebrated for centuries upon centuries—to a time almost within the memories of a passing generation. The "merry Christmas" of our forefathers—the gross festival of eating and drinking around a blazing hearth, was indeed pagan to the very heart of

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it. It was in its way just a meaningless medley of the relics of sun-worship, fire-worship, and tree-worship, of pagan libations typified in the wassail-bowl, of pagan sacrifices degenerated into a mere orgie of gluttony. The fragrance of old association, of art, of poetry, has done all that is possible to enshrine it in our hearts. The Muses have lavished their garlands upon the type of Christmas immortalised in "Poor Robin's Almanack":—

Now thrice welcome Christmas, which brings us good
cheer,
Minced pies and plum-porridge, good ale and strong
beer,
With pig, goose, and capon, the best that may be,—
So well doth the weather and our stomachs agree.

So too with nearly all that much-hymned Christmas fare and Christmas jollity—the boar's head "crested with bays and rosemary," the "mummers" with their coarse masks and doggerel rhymes, the dragons and hobby-horses. Strip them of all that has been lent them by our own tender reverence for the past, and how little remains of which even the remembrance is worth keeping? Hardly anywhere does one find the true spirit of the Christmas of Bethle-

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hem—the Christmas of Santa Claus. To some extent, perhaps, the old Saturnalian custom of mock-equality was observed, alike in the baron's castle of mediæval days and the country mansion of the Jacobean or Georgian squire. The serf and churl sat at any rate at their lord's board for the Christmas banquet. The master's son, with "roses in his shoes," led out the ploughman's daughter in the country dance. There was cheery hospitality where there was no likelihood of that hospitality being strained beyond a lost traveller, a snow-bound neighbour or two. There was benignant friendliness towards a toiling peasantry—enough to repay a year's faithful service with a season's jovial greeting. After all, no one can be merry alone, and those who would see glowing faces around them must needs forbear to frown for the while. But where in all this self-indulgent carnival does one find the spirit of love and of pure joy, the genuine and sincere sympathy with the poor, the hungry, and the homeless, the simple humbleness and sacrifice of self, the true gold and frankincense and myrrh of the Christmas offering? There is indeed but little of these to show. Our Santa Claus would find himself

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practically unknown through all the history of the "old-fashioned" Christmas, save, perhaps, as one of the traditional "mummers"—the figure of "an old man, hung about with savoury dainties." It was a figure, probably, in which lewd old Silenus himself might have recognised his own degraded likeness!

Even in most of the stories that were told around the Christmas fire, and carols that were sung amidst the Christmas snow, it is strange how little the spirit and personality of Santa Claus had to do with England's "merry Christmas." In the irony of things, the one all-popular Christmas carol that has in it the Santa Claus spirit is not an old carol at all, but a modern fabrication. It has roused the anger of all sorts of pedants and sticklers for antiquity. Seldom, indeed, has an author met with more virulent abuse from scholars, and more simple-hearted, universal acceptance from the people, than did the late Dr. Neale when he dared to set a ballad of his own to the tune of the old Latin spring-song "*Tempus adest floridum.*" Yet probably there is not one in ten among English-speaking folk nowadays to whom Christmas would be properly Christmas if it did

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not recall at some time or other how "good King Wenceslas went out, on the feast of Stephen."

True, the words are not much more than fifty years old, and there are still those who would pretend that they are worthless from every artistic point of view. But those verses upon good King Wenceslas have found their way into the very heart of our modern Christmas. And who is it that after all these centuries arrives at last upon the scene of our gross Christmas in the guise of the old Bohemian king—who else but our own Santa Claus, leaving the rich-spread banquet behind him, and going forth as is his wont, "through the bitter weather," upon his holy mission of "good-will toward men." It is pleasant to know that in the old legend upon which the ballad was founded King Wenceslas and his page found their way, despite the darkness, the wind, and the snow, to where the old peasant's cottage lay, "a good league hence, by St. Agnes' fountain." They went within, carrying with them the pine-logs, the food, and the wine, and they found there, set on the rough earthen floor, a little cradle. In this a beautiful boy-child was

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lying asleep, and over him a young mother bent low, while the old peasant stood close at hand. Above the cradle there shone a brightness that the rude cottage lamp could not itself have shed. King Wenceslas and his page, as they knelt by the cradle, remembered that even thus the Christ-child was made known to worshipping kings at Bethlehem. And as they went homewards they forgot the keenness of the wind and the still-falling snow for the gladness that was in their hearts.

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*Little fairy snow-flakes
Dancing in the flue—
Old Mr. Santa Claus,
What is keeping you?
Twilight and firelight,
Shadows come and go—
Hark, a chime of sleigh-bells
Tinkling through the snow!* Aldrich.

YET another Santa Claus, and the last ! He is Santa Claus in a guise that some may think lightly of. But he is Santa Claus none the less, and to an important section of the community the nearest and dearest Santa Claus of all. To see him one has only to peep through the parlour blinds of any happy house in any happy row fairly early on a keen frosty evening somewhere about Christmas-time. We will suppose that the table has been more or less cleared, if not pushed aside altogether. The cakes and sweets have gone the way of all good things. There is now no more of that strange silence which merely means that little mouths are full of other and far more serious business than

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speech. So soon as the crackers begin to bang and the paper caps to rustle, with shouts and sudden romps, and the sweetly ringing laughter of sheer happiness, little hosts and hostesses, and guests as well, are beginning to throw off their shyness quite on their own account. Chubby faces are aglow, wide eyes are sparkling. But the glory of the feast is yet to come. Possibly you may have caught sight of it already, for there it is, sure enough, towering to the ceiling, its last tapers being lit even now by deft fingers—the Christmas-tree ! Ablaze with splendour and delight, with flags and glittering frost, with silver and gold and shining globes many-coloured as the rainbow—who could ever believe that it had grown on earthly soil ? Joy hangs expected on every branch. Whose shall be this ship that ploughs through Arctic snows ? Whose the golden-locked fairy with starred wand and spangled dress that pirouettes upon the topmost twig ? Whose the Noah's ark that has found its Ararat amidst those wonder-laden boughs ? As yet none may say. Only one hand may tear the treasures from their resting-place. For somehow or other the rumour has already spread that this night Santa Claus him-

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self is coming—that Santa Claus himself will give to every boy and girl here, with his own hands, the gift that he has brought from ever so far away. Suddenly there is a lull in the babble of little voices. A footstep in the hall—a murmur of conference—the door opens—it is he !

Such a strange old fellow, with that great white beard of his that seems to cover up half his face, and his furred cap pulled right down over his eyes, and his bushy white eyebrows—bushier than anyone had ever seen before ! What a beating of little hearts as the old man wishes the children a merry Christmas in a sort of cheery roar that sounds at once half strange and half familiar ! Some of the tinier folk are frightened. But not so one young rascal, with mischief gleaming out of his beady black eyes, who quite refuses to share in the general sense of awe. If the truth must be told, he does not need to wonder. As old Santa Claus gathers his red cloak about him and marches toward the tree, our little friend whispers to his neighbour—as quietly as excitement will allow—“ Shall I tell you a secret ? It isn't Santa Claus at all. It's only father ! ”

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There are some people, perhaps, to whom it may seem a belittling of this world-spirit of ours, thus to box him up within the four walls of a little house, and ask him to masquerade at a commonplace children's party. What have great truths to do with toys and tinsel, and an insignificant citizen dressing up to please a pack of children? To think that all the meaning and glory of the great feast should dwindle to this cheap travesty! "Where," they will say, "is the old English Christmas?" "Where is the mighty-hearted roast beef, the geese and capon, the cakes and ale, the Yule-log, and all the full-blooded revelry that went forward when England was 'merrie England'?" But, after all, how much nearer the true spirit of Christmas is that little flicker of childish symbolism than all the pomps and rituals, the gorgings and carousings, that grown-up minds took so many centuries to evolve! For what is the spirit of Christmas in its essence? Is it not the spirit in which the Wise Men of old bowed before a little Child? Is it not the spirit in which we learn to how complete an extent we are only children too? It is all very well to talk of vastness and of great imaginings; but

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it is still true that the intellect of man, in all the profoundest thoughts of the profoundest philosophers, has suggested nothing higher, deeper, or vaster, as an image of creative deity, than just the idea of fatherhood :

Father of all, in every age,
In every clime adored !

So we need not run away with any high-flown notions about ourselves. We need not think, either, that the children's Father Christmas is any the less an important and august personage because he is playing in a game of "Let's Pretend." We too have been making symbols ever since the world began. We too have been believing in them, ever since primeval man learned in his dim way to give human likeness to the earth as his mother, and to a father who ruled the heavens. As for seriousness and dignity and such things, even the most romping children's party is in very truth dignified, compared with a good many grown-up pranks that seem portentous enough to the folk engaged in them ! What are the shows and riches that men toil and struggle for but so many toys hung upon a spangled tree ? What

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is the end of it all but a parting, soon or late, when warm lights and friendly faces must be left behind, a lonely pillow that all must seek at last, a little crying in the dark, and so—to sleep ?

As it happens, Santa Claus can be grave enough when he will, even where children are concerned. Let us remember the story told by a Flemish poet of long ago—the story of the poor widow and her daughter Julie. It was Christmas Eve, but there was no Christmas party, no cakes and toys and romps for the widow's little daughter, for they were penniless and starving. They had wandered through the snow all day, and there was no one who would help. Weary and forlorn, numbed with the cold, and fainting with hunger, they came back to their bare little attic, with its broken windows, its hard pallet-bed. But Julie kept up a brave heart. She had not lost faith—she, like the other children, would hang out her torn stocking ! This she did, and she prayed that Santa Claus would not forget ; and while her mother slept she lay awake, wondering whether, after all, Santa Claus would come. She waited and waited, and sometimes she grew afraid, and

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even the sound of her breath startled her in the darkness and the silence. But it seemed that Santa Claus would never come. The old stocking hung limp and empty. As the night wore on the air grew keener. The wind blew through the chinks in the wall, and through a rent in the roof above her head she could see a star shining. As it twinkled there alone in the far-off depths of the sky, it seemed to be flashing her a message—a message of hope. Never had she seen so beautiful a star. Whilst she lay gazing, it seemed to grow larger and more glorious. Could it be that it was coming nearer? At last it seemed to be close at hand—to fill the whole sky with light, that streamed through the little gap above her and made a splendour even in that wretched garret. And now she sees that it is not really a star, but a little company of angels winging their way together to earth. In the midst is a chariot, drawn by white horses with wings and postillioned by cherubim, and in the chariot—yes, it is Santa Claus himself!

Just over the house the chariot and its escort stopped, the rent in the roof widened, and Santa Claus came down. Gently, lovingly as a

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father he took Julie in his arms, wrapped her in his great furred cloak, set her in the chariot beside him, and with the throng of angels soared heavenward again, and the rustle of their wings was like the music of the wind. All the while the poor widow was sleeping, and when she woke in the morning she found the stocking still empty, and the form of her little daughter lying by her side—but it was cold and still. The poor widow kissed the lifeless lips and closed the tired eyes, which even yet gazed upward to where through the roof a tiny star could be seen, faintly glimmering through the dawn. For all her tears she found comfort in her heart, for she knew that Santa Claus had come indeed, and had brought for little Julie the greatest gift of all.

So even the children's Santa Claus is very real and very serious when he likes. But how was it that he came to this England of ours, which did not know anything about him until the time almost of our own grandfathers? How was it that he purged that gluttonous feast of which we were so proud, and brought to it once again the purer spirit of love, of sacrifice, of humbleness? The truth seems to be that, in

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a curious way, after wandering round the world and seeing many races of men, and the rise and fall of many empires, he came to us not from the old world, but from the new. It is to America that we owe our Santa Claus. As we have seen, he had been everywhere before then. He had known the glories of Babylon, and had lingered amidst its ruins. He had ruled the northern snows. He had sailed the grey sea with Viking pirates upon their beaked ships. He had taken on all sorts of forms, characters, purposes, but it was in America that he grew at last to be himself. For America was big enough, and young enough, to understand him. From each country of Europe, north and south, the early colonists took with them to America a different Santa Claus, and out of them all the Santa Claus of to-day was, as it were, gathered and created anew. The Dutch colonists gave him the name of their own Sinter Klaas. From Norway and Sweden came the white horses and flying sledge that carry him over the house-tops, to drop his gifts down the chimney-stack. From Germany came the Christmas-tree, with its spangles and its gleaming fruit, of which he was to become high-priest. But it was the

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little Southerners, from Spain and France and Italy, who, forgetting all about St. Nicholas and his own day three weeks before, made Santa Claus part of the Christmas feast itself, and led him by the Wise Men's star to the cradle-side at Bethlehem. Thus, only a few generations ago, Santa Claus came back again across the Atlantic with all that he had learnt in the lonely, snow-bound homesteads of the west. We had been waiting long to welcome him. Already the "old-fashioned Christmas" was gone—already the old feudal order had changed, and given place to the new. Already another Christmas was in the making—a Christmas celebrated not with riot and feasting in a baron's hall, but with simpler, truer joy at the hearths of the poor, with the gathering together of each family circle in closer bonds of love and of remembrance. The reign of tyranny and grossness, of ignorance and superstition was over, the reign of truth and humanity begun. Very soon the great heart of Dickens was to break through those barriers that still held back the impulse of loving-kindness within the household's bounds. He taught us that each little home was but an emblem of the

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world's great family, of which we are all children together. With the glow not of log-fires, but of warm hearts, he scared away the Christmas ghosts and Christmas goblins that had crowded round in the gloom of the centuries. With an outburst just of human tenderness he challenged the cold and darkness not of winter alone, but of the grave itself—and his challenge was not in vain.

At first sight it is little that this almost accidental and merely human Christmas seems to have to do with Santa Claus, either as saint or as nature-spirit. What need, some may say, of times or seasons to teach men to be kind? What need of the story of Bethlehem? But it is all part of that truth-harmony that lies behind our thoughts, our hopes, our environment. Through all the pagan ages men had worshipped the sun as the principle of life—had held festival at the turning of the year. But out of this the peace that they had longed for never came. While they worshipped around them the things of life, in themselves they cherished the things of death—war and lust and hatred and greed. At last, upon that Judean night twenty centuries ago, a little child put

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them to shame. Even since then how loath has the world been to understand ! Yet all the while, whether as Odin or Baal or good St. Nicholas or old Melchior—one feels that Santa Claus has known. Whatever purposes lie hid beyond the stars, the beauty of the earth renews itself, and old Santa Claus, old as Father Time himself, kneeling by the lowly cradle, tells us that here, with childhood's beauty and childhood's innocence for emblem, human hope also is born in human love.

Why, after all, should there be any foolish regret that Christmas should have borrowed its date and so much of its meaning from a pagan feast, and that Santa Claus himself, for all his sainthood and his bishopric, should be nothing better than an old sun-god ? Is not this Christmas of ours the continuance, the interpretation, the fulfilment of the dream of all men from the beginning of the world ? What fitter time than this midnight of mid-winter—this moment when a new hope, a new life, trembles into being over all the darkling world, and the exiled sun, at his journey's end, turns in his course to bring with him after many days all the wonders of rejoicing spring ? What

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other time than this should the Lord of Life and of Light, the Prince of Peace, have chosen for his coming? Nor is the old nature-spell lost of that Christmas that we all know—of sparkling rime, pure snow, and silver-shining stars. Around us the world lies buried in its white shroud, but it is not dead. On every side life is tingling and gleaming. The stars flash promise. There is melody in earth and sky; melody in the hearts of men. The sound of bells is in the air, floating across the valleys in wind-borne echoes—elfin-bells, soft and sweet. Our foot-falls make music upon the frozen road. Warm lights glow from cottage windows into the jewelled darkness. It is a time of beating hearts and throbbing pulses—of gladness in our very blood. Cheery greetings reach us through the breath-clouds, as neighbours pass hurrying by—greetings of kindness and of friendship. All mankind is happy. Listen! There are voices singing in the little church, decked with ivy and bright holly-berries—man's primeval tribute. "Christ is born in Bethlehem!" Yet there are those who would persuade us that it all happened long ago, and that Bethlehem is far away!

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